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ICELANDIC BEAST AND BIRD LORE.

ALTHOUGH Iceland has always been a country where the average of popular education has been high, various "superstitions" still prevail there to an astonishing degree. Illiteracy, except among defectives, is unknown, and has been for a long time. The late Professor Fiske of Cornell University, in an article published shortly before his death, concludes that there is twenty-seven times as much "literature" published in Iceland as in the United States per capitum.

In the long winter evenings in Iceland it is rare that several hours each night are not devoted to reading aloud for the family circle; the book selected may be a history, romance, or poem, but frequently also it is a compilation of popular tales. The records of various public libraries in the country show that no books are more frequently drawn than the *Thjóthsögur*—a series of books containing tales that have been taken from popular traditions in various parts of the country, and transcribed, often in the very words of the original narrator, by collectors of folk-lore.

The people are highly imaginative. The writer has frequently been a member of midnight gatherings of young people—many of them students who had spent several years in continental universities—who have sat together telling ghost stories until the summer dawn became obtrusive at two o'clock in the morning and who have then been so deeply under the influence of the stories they have told each other that they were reluctant to trust themselves in the streets until the daylight got complete mastery. It is even more frequent in Iceland than in most other countries that people will declare at noon that they believe in no supernatural beings and then shiver at midnight under the stories that are told around the fire.

There are in Icelandic folk-lore several varieties of imaginary beings that are peculiar to the country, or have at least some elements peculiar to it. The ghost there, for instance, is only a distant relative of the English representative of the class—it is a good deal more substantial and in many ways more disagreeable; it is not an airy phantom or an ethereal nothing, but is ordinarily thought of as the reanimated body of the dead man which gets out of the grave with the mould in its eyes and the appearance, if not the odor, of decay. He walks with as heavy a tread as when alive and can often be heard riding the house-roofs at night. At such a time no one ventures out, and not infrequently a man who has been coming home late at night is found in the morning lying in front of the threshold with every bone in his body broken, for the ghost or "*draugur*" has been there to receive him.¹

¹ This is the kind of ghost—the reanimated, half-decayed actual body of a

It is not the purpose of this paper, however, to deal with Icelandic folk-lore in general, but merely to indicate briefly the character of beliefs connected with animals, either real or imagined.

On account of its climatic conditions and geographic situation the country has few land animals other than domestic. As a matter of fact, it is said by scientists that the only mammal truly native is one of the two varieties of mice found there—rats have come in since the settlement and so have the foxes, in all probability, though some think the popular story of their intentional importation unreliable, and that they may have come down from Greenland on the polar ice that sometimes fills the firths of the northwest coast. Reindeer were imported in the eighteenth century and intended for domestication, but were found unsuited to the country and unprofitable and therefore turned loose. A few of them still survive in the mountains of the interior.

Much of the animal lore of the country is therefore connected with sea animals, both real and mythical, and this is perhaps the more interesting division of the subject; but there has been published recently in English so full and authoritative a summary of Icelandic fish lore¹ that little remains to be desired in that direction. It will therefore be more profitable to confine the discussion to such stories of mammals and birds as are typical and generally well known.

A curious animal is the *nykur* or fresh-water horse. When you see him he looks like an ordinary gray horse, excepting that his hoofs turn the wrong way, and that there is always a wind swelling behind his left fore leg. If this is punctured—for the animal is tame and approachable—he loses his former nature completely and becomes safe for use as a saddle beast.

In the east of Iceland there is a broad heath known as Butter-lake Heath, and from the following circumstance: A servant girl had been sent from a farm to go across the heath to the little trading village of Vopnafjörður to sell some butter. Crossing the heath she became footsore and tired and was glad to find near the road a tame gray horse which she mounted. Everything went well for some time, but near the road there happened to be a little lake—the present Butter Lake. When the horse saw the water he bolted straight into it, and carried the girl to her death. In this way the heath and the lake got their names.

Although the *nykur* is not dangerous if not tampered with, it is unsafe to have them around, for children and careless persons are apt

dead man—that Ibsen has in mind in the play the title of which has been translated into English as “ghosts.” The Icelandic “*draugur*” or Norwegian “*genganger*” are words for which there are no equivalents in English.

¹ *Scottish Magazine*, 1900.

to mount them, not realizing their danger. It is therefore advisable, when their presence in a lake or river is discovered, to scare them away. An account of how this may be done comes from Svarfathardale near Akureyri on the north coast. The *nykur* had been known, for a long time, to inhabit certain deep pools in the river that runs down the valley. One day the people of the neighborhood built a great many fires and threw burning coals into the river all day. This drove the *nykur* away effectually, as may be seen from the fact that there are none in the river now.

The most powerful animal with which the Icelander is directly acquainted is the *polar bear*. The great ice-floes that sometimes drift down upon the country bring numbers of these animals within swimming distance of the shore. Various beliefs have grown up about the bear and his habits and the peculiar virtues of things connected with him.

The bear is said to have exceedingly warm blood and never to feel the effects of cold. This quality is known as "bear-warm" and is possessed by some men, but only by those who have, immediately upon birth, been wrapped in a bearskin rug. This belief is a very ancient one in the north, and is found in the old *sagas*.

The bear is not really an animal, but a man under the spell of sorcery. This may be known from the fact that the young of the bear, when born, are not cubs but human children. The mother, however, immediately touches them with her paw, whereupon they turn into cubs and remain bears ever after. In one case, however, a man secured a bear child before the mother could touch it, and carried it home. The child grew into a beautiful woman, with no peculiarities but a fondness for the sea. This taste led her often to the seashore, and at one time she was approached by an old bear. The girl showed no signs of timidity and allowed the bear to come near her and touch her, whereupon she was turned into a bear and followed the other one to an ice-floe and disappeared. The old bear had evidently been her mother.

Polar bears are very compassionate and intelligent animals, as may be seen from the following story. Just to the north of Iceland lies the little isle of Grimsey, separated from the larger island by a narrow sound. It happened there at one time that all fire on the island had been allowed to go out, and this was at a time when no one there knew how to kindle fire. It was during midwinter, and the sound was supposed to be completely frozen over. Three of the ablest men of the island were chosen to go and seek for fire, and these attempted to walk across on the ice. When half way across they came to a crack in the ice, and, so far as they could see, this crack extended indefinitely to either side. Two of the men jumped

across the crack, but the third did not dare try the experiment and was advised by his companions to return home. This he was loath to do, however, and when they were gone he commenced walking along the crack in the ice, to see if he could not find a narrower place where he might jump over. When he had walked a considerable distance and was almost out of sight of the island, there suddenly came up a warm southerly wind, as there often does when the air currents drift across the Gulf Stream, and the ice-field was speedily broken into small bergs, upon one of which the man found himself adrift.

Towards evening the berg drifted up to a larger float of ice and the man climbed on this and commenced walking about. All at once he came upon a bear and her young lying there in the snow. The bear looked at the man and saw that he was tired and cold; she stood up, walked toward him in a friendly way, and endeavored to make plain to him that she wanted him to lie down with her cubs. This the man did with a good deal of trepidation; the bear then lay down beside him and curled up around him so as to keep him quite warm, all night.

In the morning the bear stood up and motioned the man, as well as she could, to mount on her back. This he did, but the bear shook herself so violently that the man was unable to hold himself on. After a number of rests and trials, alternating, the man, however, finally became able to stay on, and then the bear took to the sea and carried him safely to the island. When they got there the man had two of his finest sheep butchered, tied together by the horns, and placed upon the bear's back. This gift was but a faint expression of the gratitude which the rescued man felt towards his protector, but it appeared to please the bear very much, and she and her cubs undoubtedly had a very pleasant supper together that evening upon the ice-floe, when the mother brought home the gift to her young ones.

A variant of this story tells that the man lived with the bear five weeks, his food being seal flesh and bear's milk. At the end of this period the ice was for the first time near enough to shore for the bear to swim across.

A story less creditable to the bear, but reflecting a high degree of intelligence, is told in connection with a knoll known as Dýrhóll (Wild-beast Hill). This hill is close by a road leading over the mountains. A man, in crossing these mountains once, noticed upon the knoll a great bear lying. He was armed with a long staff with a sort of spear point, and when the brute saw this weapon it allowed the traveller to pass unchallenged. A mile or two farther on, the man met another travelling in the opposite direction, and unarmed. He warned the stranger against the bear, and lent him his staff as a

defence. When this man came to where the bear was, it recognized the staff, turned about and followed the first man, overtook him finally, killed and devoured him.

A bear is fair game to any one who meets it, but it is a dastardly thing, and one sure to bring ill fortune, to wound it in any way after it has received a wound which will prove fatal. Men have been known to do this and have never prospered after. Sometimes the dying bear will utter piercing cries. These should be noted, for as many as there are cries so many of the bear's relatives will appear the next year to seek revenge upon the slayers.

New Year's night (though some say that this happens on Twelfth Night) has a wonderful influence upon *cattle*, and on all animals for that matter, for upon this night they are permitted to talk for an hour following midnight. Some people do not believe in this, but men have repeatedly hidden themselves in barns on New Year's eve and heard cows talk about the strangest things, sometimes even in rhymed couplets.

Ordinary *foxes* are not known to have any very wonderful qualities, but certain mythical varieties of them are very dangerous to sheep and even to men. These are extremely difficult to deal with and can be killed only with bullets or shot made of pure silver — preferably sanctified in some manner, for the nature of these monsters is essentially that of evil spirits.

When a *rooster* is allowed to get very old he often lays an egg, but one which may always be told from hens' eggs by being smaller. This egg should be destroyed. If it is allowed to hatch, there is born from it a monster known as Skoffin, a thing with such baleful eyes that whatever it looks at immediately drops down dead. A story is told of a Skoffin which took its position near the doors of a church during service. When people began to leave the church they dropped dead one after the other. Those behind kept crowding out and no one noticed the state of affairs until there was quite a pile of dead bodies in front of the church door. Then the deacon, who was a shrewd man, noticed what was happening, and called to the people to remain in the church. He then took a small mirror, bound this on the end of a long stick and thrust it out through the door. After holding it here a moment he told the people that they might now safely go out, and they did so. When they came out they found the Skoffin dead. The wily deacon had induced it to look at its own reflection in the mirror and thus to kill itself.

Fewer stories are known of the *birds* than of quadrupeds. Many men have been anxious to learn the language of birds, for they are wise and can tell many things, both of the past and future. There is but one way to learn the bird language and that is a dangerous one,

for it is by keeping the tongue of a kite in the mouth, and this bird is of a poisonous nature. The tongue is to be cut out and kept in honey two days and three nights. It is then to be kept under the tongue, but nowhere else in the mouth, for it will cause sudden death if allowed to slip from under the tongue.

The *eagle* has, for some reason or other, acquired the nickname of "assa," and it is under this name that most of the stories about her are told. For the reason that this bird often sits for a long time together in one place, it is said of a man who tarries too long when making calls, that he "sits as long as an assa."

The eagle is often seen sitting on the bank of a stream and will remain there sometimes for hours together. It is known that at these times she is watching for a salmon to swim so close to the bank that she can seize him with the talons of one foot while retaining hold of the bank with the other. She estimates the strength of the approaching salmon carefully, and if she considers that he is probably too strong for her to lift from the river she will allow him to pass. Occasionally she misjudges a fish, however, and is unable to pull him out of the river, but her claws are so shaped that she can let go of neither the salmon nor the bank (the latter of which would be fatal, anyway) while the strain lasts, and thus assa often gets into a pitiable plight. Nothing can augur better for a man's future prosperity and good fortune than to rescue assa from her predicament, while one who sees the struggle and does not help the bird will be unfortunate in whatever he undertakes.

The eagle is dependent upon human good will in many ways, and especially in this, that her hooked beak often grows so long and becomes so curved that she is unable to eat or even to open her mouth. A man who finds an eagle whose beak is curved below her lower jaw, so she cannot open her mouth, should take assa and whittle off the beak down to normal size. To do this is as sure a precursor of good fortune as to rescue her from a too powerful salmon.

Ordinarily nothing but eagles are hatched from eagles' eggs, but if a little gold is placed in the nest there comes from one of the eggs a stone of wonderful virtue, and from the other a fearful dragon. The stone has the power to deliver any woman easily of child, or, as some say, to make the possessor of it invisible. Many people have been skeptical of these stories about assa, and once a man named John determined to place a bit of gold in the nest to test the stories. Many warned him against this, but without effect, and the gold piece was placed with the two eggs. The people of the neighborhood were fearful of the consequences, but John boastfully declared that he would take care of the dragon if it appeared, for he was a great

hunter and an excellent shot. After some weeks the people were one day horrified to see a great dragon come flying from the mountains, seize a two-year-old colt in its claws, and fly back again in among the crags. John was told about this, and he at once set out to destroy the monster. Some days afterwards he returned and reported the dragon slain, but only after difficult and persistent pursuit. Ordinary missiles had been unable to wound the monster; finally he had cut the silver buttons off his jacket and loaded the gun with them, made the sign of the cross over the muzzle, and with this charge the beast had been killed.

Virtues connected with the eagle are sometimes misused by designing persons. It is well known that if a man sleeps upon a pillow containing an eagle feather he can be easily deceived in any manner the next day and may thus be taken advantage of. This feather should be cut, preferably, from the left wing. The feather is put to a more useful purpose when one of the large wing feather stems is taken and a child made to drink milk through it. This strengthens the child's memory greatly. The claw of assa is also valuable to place in the bellows-handle in a smithy to prevent any danger of the place burning down.

A more complicated process than any of the others is that needed to insure articles against theft. A living bird is secured and one of its spurs broken near the leg and the blood allowed to drip into a glass vessel. A peculiar kind of pebble is then taken and smeared with the blood and dropped into a wide-mouthed bottle containing some consecrated wine. This preparation is to stand unmoved for seven weeks; at the end of that period the bottle is uncovered on the same hour of the day as it was put away and the blood and wine smeared, by means of a feather, on the under side of any article of great value that it is desired shall not be stolen.

The *raven* is a wiser bird than most men know, but a very greedy one and at times unfilial. So greedy is he that when there is a scarcity of other food he will even peck the eyes from members of his own family; and eyes are his favorite food anyway, as may be seen by the fact that whenever he finds a carcass of any sort he begins by eating the eyes. From the above-mentioned peculiarity of ravens arises the saying that "then have things come to a hard pass when ravens peck out each other's eyes." Another proof of his greed is the fact that he will often, in a hard year, devour his own eggs. He is also very revengeful, and if his eggs are broken he will retaliate by killing young lambs.

One of the strangest things about ravens is the fact that they have great semiannual assemblies at which they determine the general policy to be followed during the next summer or winter. In

the fall their meeting is conducted in a manner very similar to the town meeting, and a pair of crows is assigned to each farm in the district for the winter. Sometimes to the very wealthiest farms four are assigned, and three are occasionally found quartered at a farm, but only if there is a widow or widower in the household. If there are more of one sex than the other, so there are some left over when all are paired, the crowd turns on these and worries them to death. Some say the crows pair in the last resort irrespective of sex, and it is merely the odd one of the whole flock, if that happens, who is killed. These have often seemed to men very peculiar customs, but the ravens undoubtedly have some good reason for their policy.

The pairs, when once assigned to their proper farm, are very methodical in their habits. They retire to their dens early in the evening, but are astir bright and early in the morning to seek their food. If a raven is seen or heard at night, people know it is not a real raven, but an evil spirit. Travellers who come to a farmstead late at night and wake people up to secure lodging are often referred to as "night ravens."

"House ravens," or those that have been assigned by the assembly to a farm, are usually grateful for whatever good treatment they receive, and often take an opportunity of showing their gratitude in a substantial way. In Vatnsdal in the north of Iceland there is a farm by the name of Gullberustadir, situated in the side of a steep mountain. The farmer's only daughter had been in the habit of feeding the house ravens every day and they became so tame as to eat from her hand. One day when she went out to feed them they pretended to be very hungry, but whenever the girl came close to them they fluttered back a few feet, as if timid. The girl thought this strange, but followed them and did not notice until she was a good way from the house. All at once she heard a rumbling up in the mountain-side, and a great landslide came thundering down. It split on either side of the spot where the girl was standing, but destroyed the house completely. The reason the landslide split where it did was that long before Gudmundur, the sainted bishop, had tented there on one of his journeys, and had said mass and consecrated the ground. This the ravens knew, and were thus able to save their friend's life.

Many cases might be cited to show the gratitude of ravens. A well-known instance is that of the farmer at Thrush Hill who was habitually kind to all birds and had once bandaged the broken leg of one of his house ravens. The spring following he had, one day, mounted his horse, intending to ford the river on his way to the nearest village, instead of paying the toll at the ferry, for he was a very saving man withal. As he was about to ride into the water the

raven flew in his face and beat him back from the river. At first he thought of striking at the bird, who, he thought, was becoming unnecessarily saucy, but considered it better and finally decided to cross on the ferry. Another man who attempted to ride the river soon after was drowned, for the spring freshets had made it dangerous, and the farmer never doubted, nor did his neighbors, that his life had been saved by the grateful house raven.

It is very desirable, on account of their many-sided wisdom, that men should be able to understand the language of the raven, and this wise men have discovered a method of accomplishing. The heart of a raven is to be taken out of the bird while it is yet alive, and if it flies two or more paces after the operation, the heart will prove a key to all the secrets of ravens. It is to be put in the mouth whenever one desires to understand their language, and to be held under the tongue. After each period of use it is to be placed in a vessel in which nothing has previously been kept. But because this method has been known to but few, men have sought to interpret the meaning of the birds by various signs, such as their flight or the tone of their croak and the number uttered in succession. If a raven flies in the same direction as a man starting out on a journey, and flies low and on his right-hand side, it bodes good luck ; but if the raven flies in the opposite direction, or high in the air, one should go no farther, but return home, say good prayers and many, and then start out again, in the Lord's name.

If a raven sits on a church roof, shakes himself, and stretches out his wings and beak, some well-known man will die in the direction in which his beak is turned. If no death takes place near by, it will undoubtedly take place in some remote district in the direction indicated. When ravens are cawing together they are usually talking about the death of some man or other, and whom they are discussing may be told from various signs, too numerous and complicated to mention.

Another indication of the raven's sagacity has been found in the fact that when mischievous boys have taken his eggs, boiled them, and put them back in the nest, intending that the bird shall sit on them indefinitely, one of the pair has been known to make a journey to the shores of the Red Sea, where there is found a peculiar kind of pebble that restores eggs from any condition to that of freshness. Some Icelandic housewives have been very anxious to secure one of these pebbles, but are never known to have succeeded.

Vilhjalmur Stefánsson.